



FEMA

Austwell: A Small Town With Big Plans

Refugio County, TX – In July 2003, Austwell suffered extensive damage when Hurricane Claudette ravished homes and businesses in the city. Now the unpaid mayor and a building official have joined forces to adopt and enforce strict building codes.

“To protect lives and property from natural disasters, we adopted the International Building Codes as the municipal building code for all construction, alteration, remodeling, enlargement, and repair of any residential and commercial structures within the municipality,” said Earl Bluhm, building official. The codes are recommended by the Texas Department of Insurance.

Individuals seeking to build or renovate a home in Austwell must have their plans reviewed by a wind-storm engineer. “We require that you hire a wind-storm engineer who is approved by the state of Texas,” Bluhm said. “I inspect building for the city of Austwell. I will not issue you a permit to build until your plans are reviewed by the engineer.”

New construction also must be elevated at least a foot above the street. “If you build at least a foot higher than the street you should never have a flooding problem,” said Bluhm.

“There is another hazard that led to flooding in 2007,” Bluhm said. Area farming is creating small dams as well as causing ditches to overflow. The local hazard mitigation plan has been revised, and a request for federal assistance has been made to address this issue.

“We recognized that this was going to be a problem. Rather than take pot shots and waste money, we got an engineer to survey elevations of ditches and culverts and to make recommendations,” said Thomas Bernal, mayor of Austwell. “We know what we need to do. Now it’s a matter of funding to implement the projects.”

Bluhm surveys the condition of existing homes and gives advice on bringing them into voluntary compliance or tearing them down. “Mr. Bluhm means business. He doesn’t show favoritism” Bernal said. “I received a letter requesting that I tear down my mother’s unoccupied residence.”

If owners do not comply, city officials will remove the building and place a lien on the property for costs incurred. “Eight buildings have already been condemned,” Bluhm said.

Overall, Bernal is confident about the outcome. “If a category two or three hurricane comes through, we are going to look golden. We are enforcing these codes. It’s for the benefit of the residents.”



Refugio County,
Texas



Quick Facts

Sector:

Public

Cost:

Amount Not Available

Primary Activity/Project:

Building Codes

Primary Funding:

Homeowner